

## **I. MANAGING OUR RURAL HERITAGE: A NEW CHAPTER IN PLANNING FOR LEXINGTON-FAYETTE COUNTY**

### **OUR HISTORY OF RURAL PRESERVATION**

Like many urbanizing areas, Lexington-Fayette County has had a long history of awareness of the importance the agricultural industry in its economy. The resulting landscape of the surrounding countryside is perhaps the predominant element in the mixture of urban and rural values that define the essential character of our community. The unique blend of sharply defined urban boundaries, tree lined rural roads, world-renowned horse farms, riverine palisades, tobacco and other crop and livestock farms, structures, stone fences, historic rural settlements and countless other physical and social elements define the setting of our community making it unlike any other place in the country, and perhaps the world.

The citizens of Fayette County enjoy the benefits of actions taken in the past which have ensured that our community mitigated to a large degree the kind of unmanaged suburban sprawl which has devoured farm land across the nation in the post WWII growth explosion. Within the region, Fayette County was a leading recipient of that population growth. From 1958 to 1998 the community's population increased from 111,500 to an estimated 250,000 persons. Fayette County was, at times, among the fastest growing communities in the nation.

Unlike most other communities, however, Lexington-Fayette County has had a history of taking positive *action* to ensure its rural heritage is preserved. In 1958, Lexington-Fayette County embarked on a policy designed to manage urban growth and save surrounding farmland: the **Urban Service Area** approach to growth management. Basically dividing the county into two parts, an Urban Service Area planned for all manner of urban growth, and a Rural Service Area primarily for agricultural uses, this policy clustered urban growth into a compact and contiguous area of the county. The relative size of the two areas has varied over the years – the size of each has at times been larger than the present ratio. Currently, of the 285 square miles that comprises Fayette County, approximately 85 square miles (30%) of the county is in the Urban Service Area, and 200 square miles (70%) is in the Rural Service Area. In 1991, the Urban Service Area approach to planning the community was recognized as a National Planning Landmark.

As important as the 1958 designation was in creating the concept of the Urban-Rural Service Areas, the single most important event which preserved the rural area of the county was the institution of the so-called “10-acre rule” in 1964 for lots utilizing septic tanks for waste disposal. Begun as a regulation of the local Board of Health, this rule was further bolstered through its inclusion in the Zoning Ordinance and Subdivision Regulations later in the 1960s. The importance of these actions cannot be overstated. One need only to look at the rural service area development pattern that had been emerging – subdivisions of one-half to one acre lots such as Westmoreland, Wellesley Heights, Greenbrier, Spindletop Estates, and others. This growth pattern would have continued during the growth booms of the 1960's and 1970's onward, and surely, the mass of land in-use and available for agriculture today would have been long lost in the type of suburban sprawl experienced throughout the country.

## NEW CHALLENGES TO RURAL PRESERVATION

The discussion of the expansion of the Urban Service Area in conjunction with the 1996 Plan resulted in a greater community understanding of the issues related to the rural area. These issues included strengthening the agricultural industry, the preservation of the rural landscape, and protecting environmentally sensitive areas, wildlife habitat and historic areas.

In 1995 there was a major Zoning Ordinance text amendment that eliminated many conditional uses in the Agricultural-Rural Zone and restricted the size of others. In particular, the conditional uses that consume large amounts of land were eliminated or restricted in size. While the text amendment was effective in addressing the types of non-agricultural uses that are prohibited in the rural area, it has been the *permitted* residential uses that have continued to be of concern.

**FIGURE 1-1: CREATION OF 10-15 ACRE LOTS, 1990-1998**

YEAR	# OF LOTS	ACRES
1990	17	175.40
1991	49	550.38
1992	27	311.66
1993	24	285.81
1994	43	471.19
1995	39	414.00
1996	62	672.25
1997	105	1164.27
1998	63	694.94
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>429</b>	<b>4740.80</b>



*The Urban Service Area forms a dramatic edge with rural Fayette County, as this view of the pre-expansion boundary attests.*



*A ten-acre estate development off Todds Road.*

In fact, 10-acre lots have resulted in serious erosion of the land area available for agricultural use. The 10-acre estate-lot has become an economically viable alternative for high-end single family homes. From 1990 to 1998, the amount of land subdivided into 10-acre lots was comparable to the total land area utilized inside the Urban Service Area for all residential, commercial, and industrial development. It is apparent that the 10-acre lot requirement consumes land inefficiently, and is no longer effective in addressing the preservation of the rural area.

Present trends indicate that unless the community takes decisive action, the base of land available for agricultural uses will continue to erode and as this occurs, agricultural uses will find it increasingly difficult to continue. In order to function properly, agriculture needs clean water of sufficient quantity, skilled and unskilled labor, access to equipment, materials and services, and a market for goods. Over the years, a network of services and facilities has evolved to address these agricultural needs. It is clear that agriculture is much like any other industry with the "factory" being the land itself. Thus, a critical mass of land is needed to sustain these interrelated agricultural uses and to allow agriculture to operate efficiently.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RURAL SERVICE AREA TO THE COMMUNITY**

Lexington-Fayette County has a deep appreciation for the benefits that the rural character of Fayette County brings to the community. In countless public meetings, opinion polls, and other displays of the public's attitude, it is clear that a vast majority of Fayette County residents

cherish our surrounding agricultural and natural areas. Often times, this is expressed as a general appreciation of the proximity of the beauty and openness of rural Fayette County to its urban areas. However, there are many specific aspects and elements that are a part of the true importance of the Rural Service Area of Fayette County.

### **Agricultural Economy**

The most basic and often overlooked aspect of the importance of the Rural Service Area to the community is the role that agriculture plays in the economy of Fayette County. The rural landscape is by and large a byproduct of this industry. It has been said that if the agricultural industry were located in a factory, where the impact could easily be assessed, the community would have a concept of how this industry compares with other major employers in Fayette County. Fayette County cash farm receipts for 1996 totaled \$329,384,000. Of this total, \$27,166,000 was crop related, and \$302,218,000 was livestock related. These totals ranked Fayette County 18<sup>th</sup> out of 120 Kentucky counties in crop production, and 1<sup>st</sup> in livestock. The overall rank was also first in the state.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the Rural Service Area is a “factory”, employing many Fayette County residents to produce goods and services. The rural land planning process has led to a much greater community understanding of the fact that the best preservation tools for the rural service area are those that keep the agricultural economy viable and strong.



*Livestock operations in Fayette County encompass a variety of farm animals—not just horses.*

### **Rural Landscape**

The image of green pastures with horses running along plank and stone fences is what people around the world picture when they think of Kentucky. Those who live in the Bluegrass Region take pride in “having” one of the most unique, picturesque and beautiful landscapes in the world. It has shaped our culture in many ways. Development patterns and styles, our local economy, the tourism industry, and cultural events are influenced by our geography and cultural heritage. Something all people share is a “sense of place” for where they live. Communities develop an attitude about themselves depending on the collective view of its parts, good or bad. The pride we have for our rural landscape coupled with the fear of losing “our special sense of place” to non- agricultural development is driving a collective concern for preserving the rural areas of Fayette County and the surrounding counties. For years, Fayette County’s rural policies of 10-

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<sup>1</sup> Source: University of Kentucky Agriculture Extension Service



*A typical rural scene in western Fayette County.*

acre lots and an Urban Service Area concept (which prevents development involving sanitary sewers) has kept the integrity of the horse farm country intact.

The special quality of the Bluegrass Rural Landscape has been an attraction to both humans and animals as far back as we can imagine. Buffalo, deer and antelope instinctively choose this area as witnessed by the ancient migration trails still visible between Versailles and Frankfort. Native Americans, in turn, hunted and raised crops in this area and made it their home over a thousand years ago. The first European settlers who crossed the Cumberland Gap were drawn here by those same qualities. Gently rolling hills, fertile grasslands, spring fed streams and stately groves of oaks made the perfect place to settle and before long, Lexington became the cultural center in this region of the country. The image of the Bluegrass was further refined when horses, livestock and tobacco were introduced during the 1800's. Over the last 100 years, Lexington and the Bluegrass area have become world famous for scenic rural roads lined with stone fences running along side of horse farms and tobacco fields. The geography and climate has influenced and shaped the use of the land for agriculture and Lexington developed into the central "town" for the region.

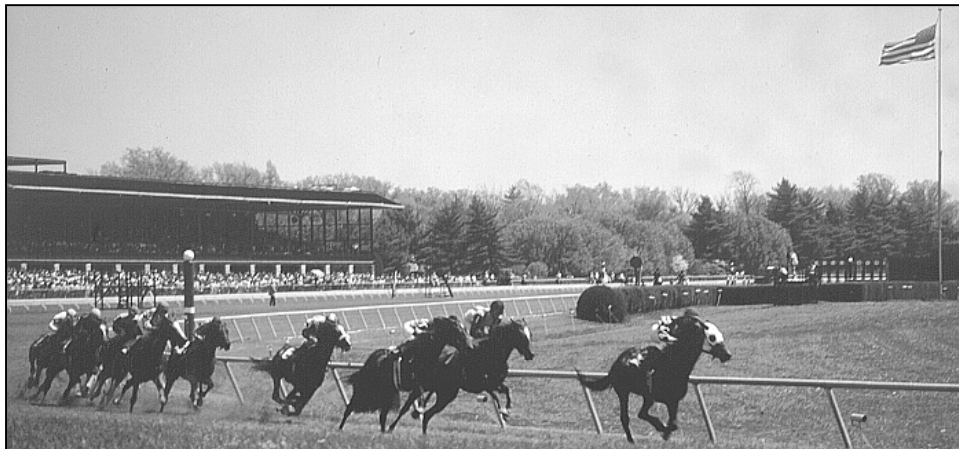
## **Cultural Heritage**

There is a close connection between the physical region we live in and our cultural heritage. By walking through downtown or a driving out Old Frankfort or Paris Pike, different elements of our heritage can be experienced. The Central Bluegrass Region developed its heritage from a number of sources; its early settlements and forts, the pre-Civil War agriculture and cultural growth, the presence of the University of Kentucky and Transylvania University, the development of the horse industry, the reliance on tobacco as the main cash crop and more recently, the transition from an agricultural area to a rapidly growing city of a quarter million people. All these things (and others), bring us to the present. We are at the crossroads of seeing our cultural heritage become an interpretation, only to be seen at a “horse park” or as a logo for a shopping center. As a community, we can choose to take action to preserve our cultural heritage for future generations and the rest of the world. If we allow our rural landscape to disappear, we will have lost a major part of our identity as residents of the Bluegrass.

## **Tourism**

The Bluegrass area has quietly become a 580 million-dollar a year tourist attraction and tourism accounted for 14,600 jobs.<sup>2</sup> Keeneland, the Horse Park, our historic, scenic corridors and the rural landscape are irreplaceable assets that bring visitors by the thousands to our area. The challenge facing Fayette and the surrounding counties is this: How can we encourage the tourist industry, while at the same time protecting the integrity of the Bluegrass from overuse and development? We can look to other places around the country and see examples of communities that allowed insensitive development to ruin their character, while others places have taken the time to recognize their special attributes and plan their growth to preserve and enhance those attributes.

In summary, if the character of the Bluegrass Region is to be preserved and enhanced, planning for the Rural Service Area must be responsive to all of the complex interactions of physical, social, and economic factors that create the sense of place and character that is “the Bluegrass.”



*Horse racing and sales activities are significant elements of both the Thoroughbred industry and tourism.*

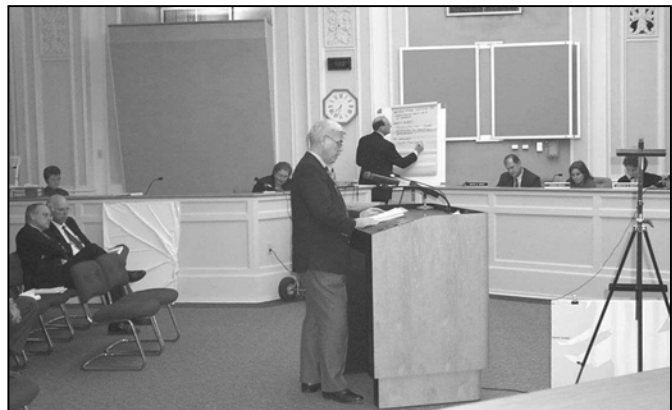
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<sup>2</sup> Source: Lexington Convention and Visitors Bureau

## PLANNING PROCESS AND RELATIONSHIP TO OTHER COMMUNITY PLANS

This plan is to be adopted by the Planning Commission as an element of the community's Comprehensive Plan and is an integral part of a series of land use plans for Lexington-Fayette County. It is the intent of this Rural Service Area Land Use Plan to dovetail with the goals, policies, and provisions of these adopted community plans. To be fully understood in its complete context, this plan document must be seen as one element of an overall community planning effort that is embodied by the 1996 Comprehensive Plan for Lexington-Fayette County, the Urban Service Area Expansion Area Master Plan, and other adopted community plans such as the Paris Pike Small Area Plan, and in particular, the Greenspace Plan. This plan also excerpts portions of the previously released reports Rural Landscape Management Plan (Tentative Draft) (Siemon, Larsen & Marsh, October 21, 1996) and Rural Service Area Land Management Plan Report #2: A Framework for Plan Development and Adoption (LFUCG Division of Planning, February 1998).

These plans and reports are an inherent part of community efforts in recent years to elevate an already-progressive planning program to even higher levels. The call to this challenge has arisen directly from the expressed wishes of the citizens of Fayette County to have a comprehensive planning program that is designed to accommodate growth in a fiscally responsive manner, based upon sound design principles, and with an overarching goal to preserve, protect, and enhance the "sense of place" and "quality of life" inherent to the Bluegrass Region. This new way of planning is intended to document the knowledge gained by and about the community on these issues during the past few years, and to lay out a positive course of recommendations for public and private actions designed to provide future generations of Fayette Countians this critical part of their community's heritage.



This plan is the product of an open community participation process that has yielded extensive information and opinions from the citizens of Fayette County as well as surrounding counties. Numerous public meetings, discussion and informational sessions have been conducted throughout the planning process. A listing of the meetings held are summarized in Appendix 2. Extensive written records of those meetings have been compiled. They are on file with the Division of Planning and are available to the public. These efforts have been undertaken to ensure, to the greatest extent possible, that an essential *dialog* occurs between citizens and their governmental decision-making bodies. This dialog is only effective when citizens are fully informed on alternative policy choices and the ramifications of those choices, and where the decision-making bodies hear and respond to preferences on how to achieve the desired results. It has also been recognized that the issues addressed in this plan have implications beyond the Fayette County boundary, and efforts have been made to include adjoining counties as participants in the discussion as well.

This plan is a significant milestone in the history of planning for Lexington-Fayette County. Never before has the Rural Service Area alone been the subject of such extensive research and review, debate and discussion, and analysis. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this effort is the articulation, from all segments of the community, of a consensus that “the Bluegrass” is a precious resource; and deserving of our commitment to the goal of finding ways to ensure the preservation of this essential element of our community’s character into the next century. It is hoped that the following sections of this plan present a visionary, yet practical and workable, series of proposals for planning, regulation, and associated implementation programs to achieve this goal.